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Radio leaks hurt U.S. in Vietnam

WASHINGTON [AP]—The Air Force failed to change tactics for fighter-bomber strikes against North Vietnam even after the National Security Agency [NSA] pinpointed radio leaks that were giving Hanoi warning of the missions, a senior intelligence official says.

Walter G. Deeley, the NSA's deputy director for communications security, made the disclosure in an unusually detailed published account of a once-classified program—code-named "Purple Dragon"—to deal with security problems plaguing U.S. military operations in North and South Vietnam.

This effort improved the effectiveness of B-52 bomber raids, reduced losses of reconnaissance drone aircraft over North Vietnam and plugged communication leaks that were tipping off enemy forces to Marine amphibious landings, he wrote.

Deeley said Purple Dragon analysts determined that the North Vietnamese were gaining advance word of the fighter-bomber strikes—including approximate target locations and numbers of U.S. planes—by monitoring uncoded radio traffic from KC-135 tanker aircraft.

DESPITE THAT finding, no communications-security improvements were undertaken, the NSA official said.

The armed services' capabilities in operations security—or OPSEC—suffered a "disastrous" downturn after the Vietnam War, Deeley said, and he pointed to the Purple Dragon effort as an example of what should be done to bolster future missions.

"Whether in the chilling aftermath of the Beirut truck-bombing or during the stiletto operation in Grenada, 'intelligence failures' often have been cited as the principal reasons why things went wrong," he wrote in the military communications journal Signal.

"Frequently, it is unrecognized that a more insidious cause may lie in lapses in our own security."

WITH MORE top-level attention now being focused on the problem, Deeley said, "there is a basis for optimism that OPSEC in the Purple Dragon style will be reborn." He

noted that the Pentagon last year issued a directive on security and created a "National OPSEC Advisory Committee."

The NSA, based at Fort Meade, Md., is this country's biggest and most secretive intelligence agency, with an annual budget estimated at up to \$10 billion.

It controls a global network of electronic intelligence-gathering posts, feeding intercepted communications into powerful computers that process the data and attempt to crack foreign codes.

In addition, the agency has responsibility for safeguarding the security of government communications and computer systems.

Describing the situation when American combat operations in Vietnam began in 1964, Deeley wrote:

"U.S. air strikes were of dubious success against an enemy who mysteriously faded from target areas; ground sweeps seldom encountered more than the aged and the very young; and Marine amphibious forces stormed virtually deserted shores.

"IT WAS APPARENT that the success of the enemy in evading our forces was probably predicated on advance knowledge of our intentions."

The problem of communist agents infiltrating the South Vietnamese army and civilian workforce at U.S. bases "was considered insoluble," he said. However, finding a way to shut off the communication leaks was considered critical.

Senior American commanders set up a team—including personnel from the NSA and Defense Intelligence Agency—to hunt for leaks.

Initially, the team concentrated on three types of air operations:

- Drone reconnaissance missions over North Vietnam, in which "losses had climbed as high as 75 percent of all missions flown."

- Operation "Arc Light" B-52 strikes against targets in South Vietnam.

- Operation "Rolling Thunder" fighter-bomber strikes against the North, selected because of indications the North Vietnamese were "successfully evading them."

DEELEY SAID drone losses "dropped dramatically" after the operations security team figured out that the North Vietnamese had been forewarned by monitoring a "planning message" sent 24 hours before takeoff of C-130 transports used to carry and launch the unmanned reconnaissance craft.

With the B-52 missions, the chief culprit was identified as an "altitude reservation" message sent from Manila to air traffic control centers throughout the Far East and Pacific, intended to warn civilian planes away from the U.S. bombers' flight path. This problem was rectified.

"Rolling Thunder strikes proved to be a much more difficult problem," Deeley wrote.

While the North Vietnamese had early warning radars to spot the American planes, largely flying from bases in Thailand, "forewarning could also be obtained from transmissions of KC-135 tanker aircraft before they or the fighter-bombers came under radar surveillance," he said.

DEELEY EXPLAINED that the tankers followed air-refueling tracks designated by specific radio call signs. For example, the call sign "Green 03" denoted the third of three tankers flying the Green track.

"Since the relationship between tanker tracks and target areas remained constant, it probably took no great skill on the part of the North Vietnamese communications intelligence analysts to identify target areas and to perceive that the number of tankers comprised an indicator of the number of ingressing [incoming] fighter-bombers," he said.

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